

reception hosts Ronald I. Dozoretz and Beth Dozoretz; Steve Case, president and chief executive officer, America On-Line; former Senator Bob Dole; former Representative Jack F. Kemp; and gospel singer Wintley Phipps, founder and director, United States Dream Academy.

Interview With Matt Lauer of NBC's "Today Show" in New York City

June 16, 2000

"VH1 Save The Music Today"

Mr. Lauer. Mr. President, good morning, nice to have you here.

The President. Good morning, Matt. Thank you.

Mr. Lauer. I don't think I'm betraying any confidence when I say that I checked with the VH1 people and I said, "How did you get the President involved in this campaign?" And they threw their arms up and they said, "He kind of volunteered"——

The President. That's true.

Mr. Lauer. —— "I mean, he's called many times and said, 'What can I do?'" Why is this so important to you?

The President. Well, Hillary and I both spent a lot of time on this, and it's important for two reasons. One is, I was in music when I was the age of these children, and I know what it can do. And secondly, I've been very disturbed over the years—over the last 20 years, more and more, as schools have come under financial pressure, they have tended to drop their music programs. You know, the principals have a lot of problems. They have a lot of challenges they have to meet, and many times the money is not there. And the school districts have cut a lot of these music programs out all over the country.

And when I heard what VH1 was doing, I did kind of volunteer to get involved. I wrote John Sykes a letter and said, "Look, I'm for this, and I think we've got to get music back into these schools." A lot of young children—we know that a lot of our young children learn better if they have access to music education. Not everyone learns in the same way. Not everyone's brain is stimulated in the same way. And the schools that have vigorous music programs tend to have higher academic performance.

Mr. Lauer. What do you say, though—I mean, let's say, devil's advocated for a second—I'm a member of the local school board, and I sit down, and I look at the budget, and it's shrinking. And I say, I've got choices. I have to make cuts. I've got school lunches over here. I have books for the library here. I have music education over here. How do you stop me from cutting music education?

The President. It depends on what your options are. But very often there are some options. And that's what that wonderful movie about music education here in New York City, "Music of the Heart," was about. But what this program tries to do is to encourage the schools to put some money into music education by giving them extra help with instruments and sometimes with other support.

And what we've tried to do at the national level, with the National Endowment for the Arts and the President's Commission on the Arts and Humanities that Hillary's the honorary chair of, is to constantly support music education, to emphasize that the schools that have good music education programs see positive, other academic advancements as a result of it, and of course, try to get some more funds for the lower income schools out there.

Mr. Lauer. But is the message getting out? I mean, you had music education as a kid; so did I. We took it for granted. We're now in a time of unprecedented economic prosperity, and still today, only 25 percent of schools across this country offer music education as a basic part of the curriculum.

The President. See, what a lot of people don't know is, over the last 20 years and particularly in the last decade or so, while our school populations have been growing again, a smaller percentage of property-tax payers have kids in the schools. And an awful lot of our schools are funded primarily through the property tax. So the schools have had all kinds of financial problems. Their energy bills go up. A lot of them have substandard physical facilities. They have the need to hire more teachers to teach various academic requirements that may have come in. And they don't want to stop any of their competitive athletic proposals. So the two things that

have suffered most in the schools are the music programs and the art programs, on the one hand, and the physical education programs for people who aren't in competitive team sports.

Mr. Lauer. But is this the way it's going to be? I mean, when people like VH1 come in and they donate money like this, it's great, but it's private and public partnership. Why can't we find a way, even through the Federal Government's assistance, to make sure that this is a basic part of education?

The President. I think we should do that. But the main thing we have to do is to build broader public support for doing it. Let me say, interestingly enough, you asked me the budget question. That's the first question: Well, what would you do if you had all these tough budget decisions? Our research indicates that the number one factor in whether music education programs stay or come back to schools is strong community involvement pushing for it. In other words, where people at the grassroots want it, the people who make the budget decisions tend to find a way to provide it.

And so, what we can best do, I think, is to point out consistently what the overall educational benefits are, number one, and number two, to try to get more Federal assistance out there to the schools to help deal with their big problems. That's why I'm trying to get the Federal Government to help with school construction and school repair, to help the school districts hire teachers to lower class sizes so they don't have to cut out music to hire that extra teacher when the population goes up, and to get the overall aid to low income schools up. So if we do those things and we get the kind of grassroots support we need, then what VH1 will be doing is supplementing a growing trend, instead of trying to fill a huge hole.

Mr. Lauer. Is it possible to take it a step further? From what I understand now, the Federal Government supplies about 9 percent of funding for schools; local and States provide the rest. Can you offer States incentives? Can you say to them, "Look, we'll provide more funding if you take it upon yourselves to make music education part of your basic curriculum?"

The President. We could do that. I hadn't thought of that, exactly in that way. What we tried to do—let me just say this. What we've tried to do for the last 7 years, since I've been President, is to say, "Look, here are the Nation's education goals. They include music and the arts. And if you come up with a plan to meet those goals, we will give you some help to implement the plan, which included music and the arts."

Basically, the specific targeted dollars we have for schools go to schools that have greater financial need, because they've got a higher percentage of low income kids, or to hire more teachers, generally, because the school population is going up.

I think if we will stay with the position that we're going to help all the schools that have these goals, which include music and the arts, and then we come in with the big ticket items, which are personnel and school building and repair, and we can build the kind of grassroots support we need, then these music programs will be able to survive.

But one of the things that really happened is a lot of folks just took the music programs for granted. A lot of people who were making tough budget decisions assumed nobody would care if they were eliminated. And it was tragic, what happened. So I think what's going to happen—you'll see a big infusion of public money going back into these programs because of what VH1 has done and because more and more parents will insist on the music being there. And I'll be glad to do whatever I can to help.

Mr. Lauer. We're going to take a little break. When we come back, I understand we're joined by another special guest, and we'll talk more about music education.

The President. Thank you.

[At this point, the network took a commercial break.]

Los Alamos National Laboratory

Mr. Lauer. And we're back with President Bill Clinton at P.S. 96 in East Harlem. Let me ask for a couple of quick answers to some questions in the news. Los Alamos: Congress is holding hearings on security breaches there. Two hard drives containing nuclear secrets disappeared. Do you think national security was jeopardized?

The President. It's not clear, but I think it's very important to get to the bottom of it. The FBI is investigating it, and we've got Senator Baker and Congressman Hamilton, who have agreed to take an independent look. It's a serious issue, and I think what we ought to do is just see the investigation through and see where the facts lead us.

But we need to do what we can to find out what happened, whether there was a security breach, and if so, how we can change it so it will never happen again.

Gasoline Prices

Mr. Lauer. You and I were both watching the news earlier about gas prices.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Lauer. People in Chicago, Milwaukee, in particular, paying 40 cents a gallon more than the rest of us.

The President. Than anybody else in the country. It's been very frustrating to me. I'm quite concerned about it.

Let me tell you what we know. We know that the prices were affected by the shutdown of a refinery, which is coming back up, a leak in a pipeline, which is the cheapest way to transport gas, and an unusual increase in demand in the Chicago-Milwaukee area. And all that affected it. Also, they used the cleaner gasoline, which is more expensive to produce, but that's only about 5 or 6 cents a gallon. So we know that it would be more expensive for a little while until the transportation and the refinery problems are solved.

What we don't know is whether there was any price gouging. So we've got the Federal Trade Commission looking into that, and we've also had the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency looking into it. I'm very worried about it. But I'm hoping that we can break the logjam on it soon.

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[Mr. Lauer introduced musician Billy Joel, who offered his advice to the young musicians present.]

The President. The only thing I would say is, don't get discouraged early. If you'll stay with it long enough, until you like to hear yourself play, then it will be easier for you to keep practicing. But if you play one

of these reed instruments, you'll squeak a lot. If you play a string instrument, it'll hurt your ears in the beginning. Just stay with it; be patient. And when you reach the point where you like to hear yourself play, then it's all downhill from there. You just keep working.

Mr. Lauer. Maybe it's a good time for you to relate to them also. You had a music teacher in your early life who had a pretty strong impact on your life.

The President. Oh, absolutely I did. I had a—well, my high school band director, Virgil Spurlin, is still a friend of mine, still writes me to this day. My grade school band director was a man named George Grey, who had a big impact on me. My vocal—my choir teacher when I was in elementary school, I still remember vividly. Her name was Lillian Rutherford. All the kids I knew had access to choir and could be in the band if they wanted to. And I'm so glad that John Sykes and VH1 and all these people are trying to make it possible for you to do this, because it's something—you don't have to—I was not as good as Billy Joel, see, so I didn't get to be a professional musician. But I had a wonderful time. It changed my life for the better. And it still benefits me, and I still play.

President's Legacy

Mr. Lauer. I'm sure at this point in your Presidency, you have to be thinking a lot about legacy. And you look at young people in the third and fourth grade—how do you want them to be a part of your legacy?

The President. Well, I want them to have more opportunity, more educational opportunity, than they had when I became President. And I want them to grow up in a country that is a more just and decent country, where there is less discrimination and where people work together more. And I think that that will be the case. But it's really important that kids are not deprived of opportunities like music, just because of where they happen to live and whether their parents have money or not. That shouldn't be what determines this.

Mr. Lauer. Just a suggestion: You've got some free time coming up in January, and Billy, you've got a little free time. I'm thinking, you go to the garage in Chappaqua; you get a little amplifier like you used to do in

high school—[laughter]—aggravate the neighbors, and put together a little band here.

The President. I accept.

Billy Joel. How close is the next house over, because—[laughter].

Mr. Lauer. Thank you so much for coming in. Billy Joel, it's always good to see you. President Clinton, nice to see you, as well.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 8:08 a.m. at the Joseph C. Lanzetta School in East Harlem. In his remarks, the President referred to John Sykes, president, VH1; and former Senator Howard H. Baker, Jr., and former Representative Lee H. Hamilton, appointed to lead a Presidential Commission to investigate possible security breaches at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Mr. Joel.

Remarks on the "VH1 Save The Music Today" Campaign in New York City

June 16, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Good morning.

Audience members. Good morning.

The President. I'd like to begin by thanking Barry Rosenblum and Time Warner; Sumner Redstone. Thank you, my long-time friend Billy Joel; and Brian McKnight, whom I admire so much. Thank you, Chancellor Levy.

I'd like to thank the student band over here from Dr. Susan McKinney Junior High School. Thank you for being here. I see Comptroller Green, President Fields, Senator; thank you all for being here.

I'd like to thank Randi Weingarten and the people from the United Federation of Teachers who are here. I don't know if any Members of the Congress are here. I think they're still voting—[laughter]—which is not a bad thing.

So what I would like to do now is to begin with the important things. First, my long-time friend John Sykes—I say "long-time friend"; we've only really known each other

about 4 years, but I've spent more time with him in the last 4 years than anybody but Hillary, I think—[laughter]—because of our love for music and because of this project, which—there have been only a few days when I wondered if I made a mistake volunteering to help, because he took it seriously.

But I do love this, and I'll say a little more about it in a moment. I love it because of the potential it has to transform the lives of these young people. And I would like to say, first of all, Kelvin, I thought you did a great job speaking up here. One of the reasons I like music, is it gives young people self-confidence and a sense of the reward you get for disciplined effort, so more of them would be able to speak like you in public. That was good.

And I would like to say especially and most of all how much I appreciate the remarkable work that Victor Lopez, the principal, and the teachers and the parents have done on this school in the last few years. I can't thank you enough.

This school, a couple of years ago, was identified by everybody as a low performing school. Eighty percent of the kids weren't reading at grade level. Enter Mr. Lopez and his team and the supportive parents: smaller classes; after-school programs; parental involvement; school uniforms; and now a commitment to music education.

In the last year alone, the number of P.S. 96 third graders reading at or above grade level has gone up more than 300 percent. In 2 years, student performance from 20 percent at or above grade level to 74 percent—in 2 years. This is astonishing for the school. And now they want music education. Why? Because it's also good for academics, as you've already heard.

But I want to just—everybody stop and take a deep breath. Look at these kids. All children can learn, and all children deserve a chance to learn. And the teachers and the principal and the parents here have done this. So given them another hand. This is unbelievable. Bravo! [Applause]

You know, I often say that I might not have been President if it hadn't been for school music. And it's really true. I started playing an instrument when I was 9. I started singing in the school chorus when I was younger than that. And then when aging took my voice